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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK BIWEEKLY REPORT - February 10, 2006

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¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

Human Rights

¶2. Officer Punished For Illegal Seizure

On February 9, the district prosecutor in Svetlagorsk disciplined a police officer for illegally seizing equipment and print material from local Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) activist and head of the BLS Telman Maslyukov. The prosecutor decided that seven police officers who were ordered to "visual inspect" Maslyukov's apartment violated the Criminal Code when they seized a photocopier, computer discs, books, booklets, and newspapers from Maslyukov's apartment in December 2005. According to eyewitnesses, deputy chief of the district police Petr Zikun was in charge of the operation and led the six officers, but it was low-ranking officer Dmitry Rogolevich who received the blame. Only the photocopier was returned to Maslyukov.

¶3. BPF Receives Second Warning

On January 30, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) issued a second warning to the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) for failing to comply with the Political Parties Law that requires all parties to have chapters in at least four regions and in Minsk. BPF deputy chairman Viktor Ivashkevich told reporters that landlords cancelled the lease of the BPF chapters' offices in Grodno and Gomel, leaving the chapters without a legal address. As a result, authorities annulled the chapters' registrations. The MOJ gave the party until March 1 to meet the requirement or face closure following the presidential elections.

¶4. Authorities Refuse Office for Language Society

Svetlogorsk authorities on January 27 refused to provide office space to the local chapter of the Francisak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (BLS) after being evicted from its office in a state-owned building. Head of the BLS Telman Maslyukov told independent online news source BelaPan that Svetlogorsk authorities claimed to have no available premises to rent to the BLS.

¶5. Police Confiscate Papers, Question Journalist

Zhlobin police officers on January 31 confiscated hundreds of copies of Tovarishch, the official newspaper of the opposition Belarusian Communist Party, from Vladimir Katsora as he was transporting the copies to Gomel. The edition featured information about the campaign of 10+ Coalition presidential contender Aleksandr Milinkevich. Tovarishch editor Sergey Voznyak called the seizure illegal since the shipment complied with Belarus' distribution requirements.

¶6. Another Paper Off State Distribution List

Post offices in Novopolotsk and Polotsk on February 3 refused to deliver the local independent newspaper Khimik to subscribers. In December, Khimik was counted among the dozens of independent publications that would no longer be sold from state-run kiosks and newsstands. Founded in 1967, Khimik sells 3,200 copies per issue.

Civil Society

¶7. Wage Increases: Pre-Election Gift from Lukashenko

President Lukashenko issued a presidential edict on January 28 raising the minimum monthly pay by 22 percent to USD 73. The minimum hourly rate increased to USD 0.43. Lukashenko claimed that the wage increase was aimed to strengthen worker's social security.

¶8. GOB Pardons Zhuravkova, Keeps Marinich In Jail For Same Crime

After months of speculation, Chairman of the Supreme Court Valentin Sukalo on February 8 confirmed that President Lukashenko in April 2005 pardoned the former head of the Presidential Administration's property management department Galina Zhuravkova. In February 2005, Zhuravkova was convicted and sentenced to four years in prison for embezzling USD 3 million, but disappeared before the verdict and was never sent to prison. In March 2005, Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov claimed Zhuravkova was ill at home and, in May 2005, predicted that she would be pardoned under a new amnesty law. Zhuravkova allegedly repaid the USD 3.4 million she stole and did not serve one day in prison. Until Sukalo's announcement, Zhuravkova's status had been unknown. The Supreme Court, however, would consider pardoning opposition activist Mikhail Marinich, who,

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ironically, is serving time in prison for allegedly embezzling USD 10,000 and stealing U.S. Embassy computers. [Note: Marinich has since suffered from a stroke while in prison and reportedly has serious health problems.] Sukalo told reporters that before the Court can review his case, the prison authorities must first submit the necessary paperwork.

¶9. Organized Crime and Drug Use On The Rise

Supreme Court Chairman Sukalo on February 8 announced that the number of organized crime and drug-related offenses in 2005 sharply increased compared to 2000 statistics. Belarus ranks 12 among Central and East European countries in overall crime, but ranks second in homicides and fourth in robberies and violent assaults. Crimes committed by criminal groups increased three-fold and organized crime offenses increased six-fold. Drug-related crimes increased 30 percent and those involving minors doubled. Murders and attempted murders increased 2.2 percent, battery increased 6.8 percent, rapes and attempted rapes 24.4 percent, thefts and burglaries 26.6 percent and fraud 33.5 percent. Over one million people in Belarus (10 percent of the total population) were charged with administrative (minor) offenses in 2005, i.e. traffic offenses, public intoxication, etc.

Economy

¶10. Iran Introduces Samand Cars

On February 6, the Iran Khodro Industrial Group and the Belarussian Younison Company signed an agreement to assemble Iranian Samand cars in Belarus. Annual production in Belarus will start at 6,000 cars, then, depending on demand, could increase to 60,000 cars. Production in Belarus is scheduled to begin in April.

¶11. More Beer For Belarusians

The Belarusian Council of Ministers on February 6 approved a USD 125 million program to boost Belarus' beer production from 71.3 million to 158.5 million gallons by 2010. The five-year program calls for building new and upgrading old breweries and changing brewery specializations depending on market demand. In 2005, the industry's expenditures totaled USD 43.6 million.

112. State Stock in 634 Companies

Independent online economic news source Prime-Tass reported on February 7 that as of January 1, the GOB owned shares in 634 joint-stock companies, a three percent increase on the year. The state held over 75 percent of shares in 355 companies in January (up from 303 in January 2005), 50 to 70 percent of shares in 80 companies (up from 66), 25 to 50 percent of shares in 166 companies (up from 166), and up to 25 percent of shares in 77 companies (down from 129). In 2005, the state received USD 100 million in dividends, twice as much as in 2004. The GOB has no shares in 270 formerly state-owned, but now joint stock companies.

113. Lukashenko the Land Baron

On January 30, Lukashenko issued an edict that awarded himself sole power to seize land. Agricultural land, nature preserves, recreation areas, historic and cultural sites, and forestland can be seized irrespective of its location or development plans. Private owners cannot sell undeveloped housing plots or farming plots for purposes other than agriculture.

Bilateral Relations

114. Russia to Help With Power Plant?

Deputy Director General of the Belarusian State Energy Concern (Belenergo) Pavel Yakubovich announced on January 31 plans to build a 450-megawatt electrical power plant in Western Belarus with Russian investment. Yakubovich would not comment whether the power plant's output would be exported or used domestically.

115. Iran Wants Belarusian Nuclear Energy Experts

Iranian Ambassador to Belarus Abdolhamid Fekri told reporters in Minsk on February 8 that his country welcomed Belarusian scientists' involvement in Iran's nuclear research program. According to Fekri, the Iranian President is appealing to foreign researchers and companies to participate in its nuclear program, but Iran would give priority to a "friendly" nation. [Comment: Belarus has close bilateral ties with Iran.] Fekri repeated the claim that Iran's nuclear research was aimed at satisfying economic needs and that suspicions over Iran's program were unfounded.

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Military

116. Belarus Beefing Up Air Force?

According to the February 3 edition of the Moscow financial daily newspaper Vedomosti, Belarus plans to buy 18 Russian-made Sukhoi SU-30k fighters from India for USD 300 million. The fighters, reported to have limited capabilities, were sold by Russia to the Indian Air Force in 1997-98 for USD 4.9 billion for the development of multi-function SU-30MKI fighters. Belarus, with the help of Russian Avionics (a subsidiary of the Irkut Corporation), plans to upgrade the SU-30k jets to the SU-KN. According to Vedomosti, sources in the aviation industry and Russian air force confirmed Belarus' plans. Belarus' Ministry of Defense on February 6 denied media reports that Belarus planned to purchase the fighters and Air Force Chief and Deputy Commander-in-Chief Mikhail Levitsky claimed to have never heard of the deal. However, during a June 2005 visit to the 927th Fighter Airbase in Beryoza, President Lukashenko

announced that Russian SU-30 multi-function fighter jets would be added to Belarus' armed forces in the future to counter NATO's encroachment towards its borders.

The Absurd

¶17. Being Drunk Does Not Pay

The Ministry of Labor on February 1 reported that in 2005, 12,500 Belarusian workers were fired for being drunk on the job. Eighty-five of those were prosecuted for their intoxication. In addition, 10,375 company administrators paid the government USD 225,000 in fines for allowing intoxicated employees in the workplace.

¶18. Interior Minister Corrects President's Statement

In a January 27 interview with reporters, President Lukashenko stated that if there was any "bodily movement" toward destabilization in Belarus, the GOB would "twist the necks" of those involved and those who would encourage and finance such a movement. Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov on February 1 told reporters that the GOB would not "twist necks," but would maintain stability and order so that the population could continue to live and work in peace.

¶19. To the South Pole!

On February 9, Belarus' first Antarctic team of researchers and one MP began its expedition to the South Pole. During a send-off ceremony at Parliament, House Chair Vladimir Konoplyov claimed the expedition would contribute to Belarus' international status and presented the team a Belarusian flag to be placed on the continent. Director of the National Academy of Sciences' natural resources management and environment department Vladimir Loginov noted the economic importance of the trip, since Antarctica may become a source of natural resources for the global economy. The expedition is to end in April.

¶20. GOB Demands More Tourists To Lukashenko's Hometown

On February 9, Mogilev authorities, in coordination with their 2006-2010 tourism development program, ordered the local tourism agency to triple the number of incoming tourists in 2006. The Mogilev region is Belarus' least attractive area for tourism and only attracted USD 930,000 in revenues in 2005. Head of the regional Physical Education, Sports, and Tourism Department Vladimir Yudko expected the number of tourists to meet the countrywide average in 2006. The Mogilev authorities' development plan proposes 20 tour routes throughout the region that include attractions like the Mogilev Zoo, Belarusian ethnographic village, ancient monuments, and Aleksandriya, the hometown village of President Lukashenko.

Quote of the Week

¶21. In a January 27 interview with reporters, President Lukashenko stated that if there was any "bodily movement" toward destabilization in Belarus, the GOB would "twist the necks" of those involved and those who would encourage and finance such a movement. Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov on February 1 retracted the statement.

"We are not going to "twist necks," but we will maintain stability and order and control processes so that the population of the republic will continue to live and work in peace."

PHLIPOT